

UNTIL MY BLOOD IS PURE

A Story

There was another Englishman staying at the Hôtel Beauregard. His khaki trousers were big in the seat and narrow at the ankles. He spent a lot of time talking to the boy at the reception desk. The boy wore a thick silver name-bracelet around his very slender wrist, and was acting coy.

The Englishman was writing a history of the German Colonial Empire. He had been investigating the activities of the Black African Nazi Movement, here in Douala, in the late Thirties. Black men in black shirts with red armbands and black swastikas. The idea made him very excited.

The owner of the hotel, Monsieur Anatole, was a man in his sixties who always wore a grey double-breasted suit and two-tone shoes. He was a member of the Bamiléké tribe. He also owned a fleet of taxis and the Confidence Trading Company. Monsieur Anatole had the idea of going to Rhodesia to fight for his black brothers. He told me he would go, personally, to Rhodesia, and thumped his hand hard on his chest, and held it there.

None of the waiters at the Hôtel Beauregard was a Bamiléké. But almost all the guests were.

They drove down from the hills in Monsieur Anatole's taxis, and came in powdered from head to foot with red dust. They made straight for the shower upstairs. When they came out, they were black and gleaming, and over the floor of the

shower there was a thin layer of mud.

After dark they put on tight white shirts and bright blue suits and went up onto the roof to drink Monsieur Anatole's whisky. Later in the evening, they would lounge about the bar and look over the whores.

The other foreign guest was a Chinese who went everywhere clutching a black attaché case.

It was hot and airless in the bar. All the lights were red. The one white light came from the door leading into the hall, where the Englishman was still chatting to the receptionist. It was almost ten o'clock. The boy would soon be off duty.

A man beside me was pretending to read a newspaper, but the pages glowed red and the print was unreadable. Over the bar there was an advertisement for Guinness and a slogan: *Le Qualité de l'Homme Fait Son Trésor*. In the Republic of Cameroon Guinness is thought to be an aphrodisiac. The barmaid wore a green plastic harp in her hair.

The waiter had spilled a can of pineapple juice on the floor, the smell of pineapple mixed with the smell of disinfectant and the smell of Guinness and sweat. The seats were covered in warm red plastic. Your back stuck to it and came away with the sound of sticking-plaster.

Three Bamilékés came in with two girls and sat at the next table. Like most Bamilékés, they were big men with very round mouths. They were swimming in sweat. Grey patches gradually spread over their shirts. They ordered two beers and a whisky, and soft drinks for the girls.

The waiter moved clumsily. His arm muscles bulged out from under his shirt sleeves, and were netted with thick veins. He was a simple, placid boy and he smiled easily. He thought he had understood the order, but he came back and asked them to repeat it. One of the men went over it slowly, in French. His companion turned to me.

'Lui,' he pointed to the waiter. '*Lui, il ne comprend pas. Il est sous-développé parce qu'il a été né dans la zone britannique.*'

The waiter came from West Cameroon, which was once a

British Protectorate.

His face puckered with furious concentration. He looked along his biceps muscle at the tray with empty glasses on it. Then he grinned. And the grin grew and grew and the red light caught his teeth and made them glow.

'Sir!' he said to me. 'Dis people dey be fashun no fine. Dey was fashun by de Frenchman and dey hab no manners.'

There were five whores attached to Monsieur Anatole's hotel - five permanents with rooms of their own - and several transients who took their customers out with them. Four of the residents were thin, but Big Mary was the biggest whore I have ever seen.

Her shoulders heaved like a volcano when she laughed, and her smile lit up white and gold. She lumbered from table to table, wisecracking with the men, who creased up and cried out loud and hung onto their stomachs for laughing.

'That', said one of the Roundmouths, 'is the *première putain du Beaugard*.'

'So I see.'

'You like her?'

'Not for me.'

'Hal' said Roundmouth, who, having discovered I didn't like fat women, assumed I did like thin women, and decided to take me in hand. He enumerated the charms of all present and selected for me a fifteen-year-old, all arms and legs in a dress of see-through pink. She sat alone in a corner, chewing something.

I walked over in her direction and pretended to take a look.

'Don't touch them, Sir!'

The Chinese was at my elbow.

'Don't touch them. There will be diseases.'

The girl sat up, interested, and looked me up and down with sad, amused eyes.

'*Qu'est-ce que c'est?*' She thumbed the Chinese.

'*C'est un Chinois.*'

'What she say?' asked the Chinese.

'She asked who you were and I said you were Chinese.'

'*Mais qu'est-ce que c'est?*'

'*Un Chinois,*' I repeated.

'*Chinois?*' she stuck out her lower lip. '*Connais-pas Chinois!* *C'est garçon ou fille ou quoi?*'

'*Garçon.*'

'*Et ce n'est pas beau,*' she said, definitely.

'Did she ask you?' asked the Chinese.

'For what?'

'Sexuality.'

'Not yet.'

'Don't touch her.' He clawed at my sleeve. 'I touch girl twice in life. Never touch girl again.'

'I won't touch her,' I said. 'I'm tired. I'm going to bed.'

It was equally hot at breakfast, although the fans in the restaurant were ruffling the grimy white curtains. The Chinese came in, smiled nervously and asked if he could sit at my table. He had on a freshly laundered shirt. His hair was slicked across his forehead. He put the attaché case on a free chair and ordered coffee and fried eggs.

He was tired, he said. He had worked all night on his order book. He was a travelling salesman from Hong Kong. Selling poplins was his family business and now it was bad business, because Hong Kong poplins were undercut by cheaper poplins from Colombia, North Korea, Poland and China. 'Bad situation,' he said. 'My poplin ten pence yard forty-eight inch wide and black man want pay seven half pence only. Not possible continue.'

He blinked through his horn-rimmed spectacles at the waiter who brought the eggs.

'Cameroonian people,' he whispered. 'Bad! All want is money. Money and not work. Black man not like yellow man.'

He reached for the tomato sauce bottle and unscrewed the lid. His hand was shaking.

'Yellow man not like black man,' he went on. 'Cameroon bad, but no so bad. Nigeria very bad! Bad trouble with customs. Customs officer make me pay on samples only and keep money for self.'

And it was sad and lonely, he said, alone in Africa, away from his family, so long away on the world tour. Married one year only, the wife and the mother living together, and the baby boy born two days before he left.

'She kill me,' he said.

He was close to tears. He held onto the sauce bottle. He had not poured from it and the eggs were going cold.

'My wife kill me if she find out.'

'Kill you?'

'I cannot return until my blood is pure. I not go with girls again. Not never. One emission only. One half minute only!'

'How long ago?'

'Five week.'

'In Douala?'

'In Fleetown. I have one friend in Fleetown. Nepalese. Also merchant. He giving drink. He getting girls. I write him what he has done.'

I asked for clinical details and, assuming a cheerful manner, assured him that syphilis in its primary stage was a complaint that well-travelled men, such as himself, took in their stride. A blood-test, a course of injections, another blood-test. The cure, I said, was final. No reason for his wife to find out. No reason why he shouldn't father lots more baby boys.

'All I want is certificate of pure blood.'

'You want a cure,' I said. 'A certificate is paper and syphilis is syphilis. You have been to a doctor?'

'He gave me paper of pure blood but the wound not go.'

'Who recommended him?'

'Confidence Trading Company. Give me no confidence at all! No confidence in African doctor. He take the money and the wound not go.'

'Some African doctors are excellent,' I said, 'but there are different kinds of doctor. I hope he gave you an injection?'

'He gave me remedies. Please, Sir! You come with me! You explain doctor. Speak French with him.'

We went out into the street. It was grey with the sky overcast. There were shabby concrete buildings, some limpleaved trees coated with dust, tangles of electric wires and kite-hawks hovering over the refuse dumps. There were ash-grey puddles, iridescent at the edges, and pot-bellied children with green mucus round their noses. There were men going in and out of bars, and old women shuffling round shacks that had been bashed out of oil-drums. Near the railway station, the Chinese found the pharmacy of Dr Shere Malhalua Meji.

I looked at the billboard that advertised the doctor's Isis Pins and 'other celebrated remedies for modern men and women'.

We did not go to that doctor.

We turned up a tree-lined avenue, past the old Lutheran Cathedral, its granite tombs untended now; past the newer Catholic Cathedral; past houses with well-kept gardens and red front gates, and cafés with awnings and bookshops full of students. In the big shopping street, Germans were buying safari equipment and Belgian art dealers were buying old fetish figures, piled head first and feet first like the photos of bodies in Belsen. There were shop-signs announcing the latest imports — Belons, Camemberts, haricots verts — and in that street there were other kinds of doctor.

The Chinese winced when the doctor said how much the injection would cost. But I said something about secondary and tertiary stages and, in the end, he took it well, the injection and the payment. He was very methodical. He made notes in Chinese about the timing of future doses.

Afterwards, over coffee, he brightened up and talked about the baby boy. From Douala he was going to Yaoundé, and from Yaoundé to Bangui. Then he'd go downriver to Kinshasa and drive across Zaire by car. Zaire was a bad place.

Bad people and lions in jungle. I said he might have to watch for elephants on the road. The idea of elephants alarmed him, but somehow he'd get through to Lusaka, and up to Dar es Salaam, and along the coast to Mombasa and inland to Nairobi. Kenya was a not-so-bad place. Other Chinese merchants in Kenya. And from Nairobi he'd fly back home if, by that time, his blood was clean and pure.

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